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MY TURN: When federal government fails on higher education

By Sen. Jim Jeffords

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Politicians, myself included, are prone to touting achievements. But with the freedom that comes from not facing re-election, I'd like instead to focus on a failure.

Throughout my 30 years in Congress, I have served on the education committees of the U.S. House and Senate, continuing a Vermont tradition that dates at least as far back as Justin Smith Morrill and up through my predecessor, Bob Stafford.

Over this century-and-a-half span, federal support for higher education generally increased. In Morrill's day, college was seen as the preserve of the elites. The children of farmers or shopkeepers or tradesmen, like Morrill himself, simply did not go to college. He set about to change that, and with the election of Abraham Lincoln saw the Land Grant College Act of 1862 signed into law, providing that at least one college in every state would be established to teach agriculture and mechanical engineering. During Senator Stafford's tenure, the federal government greatly expanded its commitment to higher education by creating grant and low-cost loan programs to help qualified students attend college. Not only could the children of farmers attend a college, now they could afford it.

Throughout most of this time, the United States had the luxury of economic isolation. Vermont's competition was limited first to our neighboring states, and then to other regions of the country.

At the dawn of the 21st century, that is no longer the case. We buy goods and services from all over the world, and almost every week we encounter some surprising new way of doing business that challenges our assumptions about inherent U.S. competitive advantages. The engineers that Justin Morrill sought to train are now being graduated in far greater numbers overseas than here at home.

Yet while much has changed in the move towards a global economy, Vermont is still a great place to live and learn. And those, I think, are the competitive advantages that we need to capitalize upon.

There is a great deal of talk in Washington about promoting greater competitiveness, but the policies being pursued by the federal government today are heading us in the opposite direction.

The federal deficit this year is estimated to set a new record at \$423 billion. The U.S. trade deficit for 2005 is in excess of \$700 billion. All of this occurs as our national debt continues to soar: We borrowed close to a trillion dollars from our competitors around the globe last year.

The federal government cannot wave a magic wand and fix these problems. But there are two things it can and should do: invest more in education and bring its fiscal house in order. Instead, President Bush recently submitted a budget that would actually reduce funding for education and expand the deficit by cutting taxes – largely for wealthier Americans. This budget, or something similar to it, is likely to be adopted in the year ahead. And the prospects for federal support for education do not look much better in the foreseeable future.

It is a lot to ask, but I hope the state of Vermont will step in where the federal government is failing in its responsibilities. I applaud Gov. Jim Douglas for making a bold proposal in this direction with the Vermont Promise Scholarship program. His initiative would provide 1,000 scholarships of up to a \$5,000 annually to Vermont students attending a Vermont postsecondary institution. In return, the individual would live and work in Vermont for at least three years following graduation.

Vermont's state legislators will have to decide whether the Governor's proposal should become law. I know the source of funding, the tobacco settlement money, has generated concern, and it isn't my intention nor desire to insert myself into the middle of a legislative debate on how to pay for this program. But I urge everyone involved to work together to make some version of this important initiative a reality. I can't think of a better graduation gift for Vermont's high school seniors, or a better investment in Vermont's future.

Jim Jeffords is Vermont's independent senator in the U.S. Senate.